



MODEL UNITED NATIONS

Historical Crisis: Aqua Tofana—Power and Poison in 1600s Rome

Chair: Sophie Lubin '25

Letter From the Dais

Dear delegates,

My name is Sophie Lubin, though many CA students call me Sam, and I'm pleased to be your chair at CAMUN this year! I've been involved in Model UN since middle school, and have found many virtues and friends alike in frantically typing and motioning with my hands. This is my third year chairing CAMUN and I'm also one of our Directors of Training. I'm excited to present a crisis committee based in real history with a side of plotting and murder. Due to the uncertainty of the historical record itself, who knows where the story truly leads?

As you prepare for debate, I challenge you to think about what angles the character you represent would take, how they might think about the patriarchy, and what would most benefit them in the situation, even if it's betraying their initial allegiances!

Because delegates are representing people, they are permitted to use first person "I" in papers and speeches, though we will be following standard MUN decorum and procedure otherwise.

Please don't hesitate to reach out with any questions, I am always happy to connect with delegates. The future of discrete matricide is in your hands.

Sincerely,

Sophie Lubin '25

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Background

The specifics of this story aren't very clear. The issue with historical events set in the 16th, 17th, and even 18th centuries is that it becomes increasingly hard to find reputable sources, and details get muddled. The clearest fact is this: Aqua Tofana was a highly potent, almost tasteless, and odorless poison distributed by a circle of women in the 1600s. Used by nobles and commoners alike, women used it to discreetly kill their husbands in a highly patriarchal society where most women were deemed the property of their spouses. The motives of killing were many: abusive husbands, acquiring wealth, secret affairs, wishes to remarry, and gaining the little rights widows had over married women. We can be fairly sure from historical documentation that some version of this story occurred, though whether it was in Naples, Rome, or Palermo is unclear. The exact timing is also murky, as it could've taken place anytime from 1630 to 1720. There are stories of it being distributed as a beauty product for women, holy water, or some sort of longevity elixir. In the end, this poison may have killed upwards of 600 men. With that being said, there is also a chance it was all a myth. The rest of this background guide is a patchwork of these various stories, brought together with a through line of my own creations, and will be taken as fact in committee. While I recommend doing your own research, I will be setting the committee in Rome around 1650, with the poison being widely distributed as a beauty treatment.

Aqua Tofana

A tasteless, odorless poison. A total of 5-8 drops are required to kill a man. Either mix them into his soup all at once to find him dead after seven days, or slip a couple drops over the course of several weeks, allowing him to avoid a suspicious and sudden death. His worsening condition lets him get his affairs in order prior to his passing, and his declining mental state may be the perfect opportunity to suggest willing his estate over to his young wife...

While rumors of this poison have been heard around town, the first official warning notice has just gone up in this committee, asking for precaution as well as notifying the public of the primary symptoms of those poisoned. These include: agonizing pains in the stomach and the throat, vomiting, extreme thirst and dysentery. All of these are highly suggestive of arsenic poisoning, although it is possible that the poison could also contain antimony, lead, or other toxic substances. An entry in one of the poison maker's diaries mentions a fourth possible ingredient, solimato, a corrosive sublimate. This is a highly toxic contemporary treatment for venereal disease, more usually known today as mercuric chloride. Public knowledge of the poison is limited, yet it is still causing unease amongst many powerful men throughout Rome. Only the inner circle of the poison ring know the exact details of how this poison is made, but it is thought that the original recipe came from Giulia Tofana.

Setting

It is the mid 1600s, Rome. High society is flourishing with dukes, dutchesses, and powerful families climbing their way through the social hierarchy. Markets are booming and various businesses and professions are upkept by the working and middle classes. The streets bustle with activity and ports are thriving with exports from afar. The plague is persistent, but distant, and most people are concerned with more minor health issues such as smallpox or lead skin poisoning.



Palermo, from the 1572 atlas of Georg Braun and Hogenberg, when the chief poison-chemist Giulia Tofana was born there.

The Working Class

Society operates under a strict patriarchal system. The nuclear family is strong, with the eldest son often inheriting the family fortune. Young women are the property of their fathers until they are married, when they then become property of their husband. Many civilian couples marry for love, but even in the working class wealth and status has a sway, and families are eager for their daughters to marry wealthier men or merchants. Regardless of arrangement, the husband has complete financial, governmental, and physical control over his wife and children (who must ask his permission for nearly anything). Many working class women have their own jobs, though the paycheck is made out to their husbands. Such jobs may include being a midwife, store clerk, or weaver, which are often more detail-oriented or interpersonal rather than laborious. Many others solely perform household duties: cooking, cleaning, going to the marketplace, acting as homemakers and raising children.

Many men work in hard labor such as fieldwork or mining. However, in the mid-1600s, arsenic mining was a clandestine and dangerous activity, as it could be tied to the production of poisons like Aqua Tofana. Arsenic, a naturally occurring element, is extracted from minerals such as orpiment and real tar, which were found in volcanic regions and mining areas around Rome. Men involved in this work would typically mine these minerals from rocky outcrops or underground deposits, and the extracted ore was crushed and heated to release the arsenic, which would sublimate into a toxic powder. Historically, arsenic was highly sought after not only for its use in poisons but also in

medicine, cosmetics, and even as a pigment. However, its extraction is extremely dangerous, as exposure to arsenic dust or fumes could be lethal. The miners, typically working in harsh and unregulated conditions, face significant health risks like poisoning and respiratory issues. However, the demand for arsenic persists, due to the shadowy market for poisons during a time when political intrigue and personal vendettas were common. The illicit trade flourished alongside the legal marketplaces, with miners and distributors working discreetly to avoid the authorities.



Signs of poisoning on the hands of an arsenic miner.

Working class men that were more well-off often are involved in trade or overseeing manufacturing, including mining, agriculture, and businesses. Merchants are well connected in society, sometimes even traveling to far off lands to make deals, conduct trades, and relay goods with other colonies. Some of the most successful would even interact with nobility or their associates, proffering gems, fine fabrics, and delicacies from abroad. Similarly, landing a title as an assistant or accountant to a noble family or acquiring a position with the police would land men in a good position.

Nobility

Nobility, including dukes and duchesses, play a crucial role in the political, social, and economic structures of the time. Nobility is a hereditary class, with titles and lands passed down through generations. Their power is often tied to their wealth, land ownership, and influence at royal courts. Dukes and duchesses are among the highest ranks of nobility, just below monarchs, and they often govern large territories or hold significant sway in royal affairs. High society and relations between affluent families is a complicated web.

Marriage for nobles is rarely a matter of personal choice or love; instead, it was a strategic tool. Marriages are carefully arranged to strengthen political ties, consolidate power, force alliances, expand territories, or secure financial stability. Typically, marriages are arranged by families, with the

involvement of advisors or diplomats. For example, the marriage of Marie de' Medici to King Henry IV of France in 1600 is a prime example of a strategic noble marriage. Her dowry included vast wealth, which helped stabilize French finances, and her Italian connections strengthened France's political ties. While she was in a high position of nobility within polite society, marrying a royal cemented her lineage into the royal court. In this way, marriage becomes a key strategy for nobles to secure favor with a monarch or advance their position in court. A duchess, for instance, might be married to a duke who is a close ally of the king, thereby strengthening her family's influence. Producing heirs is a primary concern for noble couples, as without one the family would cease and they would not be able to preserve their titles or estates. While noblewomen hold significant social status, they often have little say in their marriages. Their primary role is to bear children and manage household affairs, although some wield considerable influence behind the scenes, acting as regents or advisors. Extramarital affairs are relatively common, especially in the upper classes. These relationships are often tolerated as long as they do not threaten the legitimacy of heirs or the family's reputation.

Church and State

Rome was the heart of the Papal States, a theocratic federation ruled by the Pope, where the Catholic Church had immense power over both spiritual and temporal affairs. The Papal States were a collection of territories in central Italy under the direct rule of the Pope who governed through a complex bureaucracy that included cardinals, bishops, and secular officials. Most critically, he essentially blended the religious and administrative roles throughout Rome. The Pope's authority extended to maintaining armies, negotiating treaties, and engaging in political alliances. Furthermore, the Church controlled education in Rome, regulated morality, and enforced religious orthodoxy.

The *sbirri* (papal police) were responsible for maintaining order and enforcing the Pope's laws. They were often seen as corrupt and heavy-handed, and their methods were feared by the public. Punishments in Rome were generally very harsh to deter others. The Church's authority meant that crimes such as heresy, sacrilege, and witchcraft were treated with particular severity. However, common crimes like robbery, assault, and murder were also dealt with severely. The Church and State worked together to maintain control over the population. Informants and spies were common, as the authorities relied on a network of eyes and ears to monitor suspicious activity. Public executions were warnings to others.

There was also the Roman Inquisition, which was established in 1542 by the church to root out heresy and enforce religious conformity. This was a special police force independent of the secular authorities but who often worked with them. The Inquisition had its own courts, prisons, and methods of interrogation, including torture.

The Judicial System and Executions

The judicial system in Rome was a mix of ecclesiastical and secular courts. Ecclesiastical courts handle cases involving clergy, heresy, and moral offenses, while secular courts deal with civil and criminal matters. Judges were often appointed by the Pope, and the trials were conducted with little to no transparency. The evidence given on trial could include confessionals (sometimes obtained through torture), witness testimony, and circumstantial evidence. The accused had limited rights, and the burden of proving their innocence usually fell on them.

Punishments were severe and designed to serve as public spectacles. Common penalties included fines, imprisonment, flogging, and forced labor. For more serious crimes, such as murder or heresy, the punishment was often execution. Executions were carried out in public squares to maximize their deterrent effects. Hangings were common for peasant criminals, whereas beheading was considered a more “honorable” form of execution for nobles. Heretics, witches, and those convicted of egregious crimes against the church were sometimes burned at the stake in order to ‘purify their soul’. After execution, the bodies were often left on display as a reminder of the consequences of breaking the law. In this crisis, the poisoners would be hanged, as many of the alchemists were not of noble enough status to have a beheading.



Gossip and Information Spreading

Gossip is a powerful and pervasive force in society, serving as a primary means of spreading news, rumors, and information. Marketplaces are bustling centers of activity where people from all walks of life gather, so naturally they serve as a breeding ground for gossip as merchants, shoppers, and travelers to exchange rumors. Merchants were key sources of information, as they often traveled between cities and regions. However, gossip was not always accurate, and rumors could spread quickly, often becoming distorted and blown out of proportion. Brothels also doubled as a place for information spreading, as they were often privy to sensitive information that clients might accidentally spill. This made brothels fertile ground for gossip, especially involving the wealthy and powerful. In some cases, gossip gathered in brothels could be used for blackmail or leverage. Knowing the secrets of an influential individual could be extremely powerful, and brothel workers could use this knowledge to their advantage. On the other side of society, polite tea, dinner parties, and formal balls served as important events for nobility to enterprise, gossip, and form alliances.

By the mid 1600s, printed newspapers and pamphlets were beginning to emerge, but they were often expensive and limited in circulation, so they were primarily accessible to the wealthy and literate. Early newspapers were often used as tools of propaganda by rulers and religious authorities to shape public opinions. Flyers were more widely distributed than newspapers, and were used to announce public events, proclamations or executions, and were often posted in public places for people to read or hear aloud. Despite the existence of newspapers and flyers, most people in this time frame were illiterate or could not afford printed materials. As a result, the majority of Rome relied on word-of-mouth.

Case Examples

Case 1: Death of Francesco Cesi

Francesco Cesi was the Duke of Ceri and certainly the richest and most powerful of all the individuals involved in the Aqua Tofana scandal. The scion of a highly distinguished family, Cesi died suddenly and unexpectedly in June 1657. Suspicion eventually fell on his even better-connected young wife, Maria Aldobrandini, a member of one of Rome's most powerful and influential noble clans.

Cesi was born around 1608 and first married in 1626. Aldobrandini, who was his second wife, was only 13 years old when they wed in 1648, 30 years younger than her husband, and no more than 22 at the time of his death. Described as "young and beautiful, courted by many," her beauty is only slightly dimmed by smallpox scars, according to a contemporary survey of the ladies of Rome. This lends at

least some plausibility to the account that the marriage was a loveless one, even though his information was drawn from testimony given by Giovanna de Grandis while she was facing the likelihood of execution, so its reliability is questionable.

According to De Grandis's testimony, the Duchess had fallen hopelessly in love with another suitor: a handsome count (and incorrigible rake) by the name of Francesco Maria Santinelli (1627-97). Santinelli showered her with love poetry, which can be used to point the start of their relationship to the months before the Duke of Ceri died. Aldobrandini's infatuation gave her a pressing reason to rid herself of a husband who was—as the defendant claims—already ailing.



Laboratory of Giulia Tofana

Case 2: Mariana Leos and Evander Leos

Mariana Leos is the wife of Evander Leos, a somewhat successful spice merchant with a well connected position in society. It was an open secret that Mariana had married Evander for his financial stability, but for the first couple of years, it appeared they had as happy a marriage as one could hope for in that situation. However, in the current day, neighbors have speculated that there may be some power imbalances between the two (especially considering it is typical to hear raised voices every night from their house), but in public they seem fine. They have a daughter and son, ages 13 and 6 respectively.

More damning than their marriage quarrels is the event that occurred in their household only a week ago. For months, Evander had complained of an “off” taste within his soup, but Mariana had always sworn it was because the spices must have been contaminated. Evander never felt sick after this soup

however, so he usually just brushed it aside. But on one fateful night, Evander was about to eat his soup when Mariana slapped the spoon out of his hand, trembling with fear and with a guilty look on her face. Due to Evander's propensity to knowing gossip in his position as merchant, he immediately assumed that Mariana had poisoned his soup with Aqua Tofana but she ultimately got cold feet and couldn't commit the crime. Mariana has not commented about these accusations.

Their marriage is currently at unease—Evander is reaffirmed in their marriage bond, as clearly Mariana loved him enough to not follow through with (his hypothesis) of poisoning him. However, he is equally skeptical, as if Mariana did try to poison him, she would have the intent to kill.

The Current State of Affairs

Every street corner is filled with gossip about the death of Francesco Cesi and the mysterious illness of Evander. Whispers about this mysterious substance called "Aqua Tofana" are heard in every dark corner of the city, and more and more women have started exercising their freedom, as their husbands are too scared of death to control their wives as much as usual. As such, Rome is rife with unease, as household tensions soar and the social order becomes fragmented. For the first time, the women of every social class can hold the upper hand over their husbands, even without actually having the poison in possession. Duchess Maria was originally met with suspicion due to the timely passing of her husband, Duke Cesi, but due to her high nobility status her trial was brushed aside and delayed. However, there are some rumors that her maid saw her in possession of a hand cream she didn't recognize at all. However, this has mostly been brushed off as a groundless accusation.

The same can't be said for Mariana. Mariana's trial date hasn't been set, but the gossip is ramping up and Pope Alexander VII is starting to create a team of policemen to start hanging convicted poisoners and murderers. Because Mariana has no strong social status, there would be no way for her to wave away the blame. Giulia Tofana's name has been heard in the shadows but there is no public conclusive evidence thus far that can trace her directly to the crime and most other women involved have not yet become public. In this time, trials were essentially decided before the people even arrived, and women fared even worse. As such it is imperative that delegates form strong alliances with one other (or strong alibis).

Questions to Consider

1. How morally flexible are you?
2. What are your thoughts on the patriarchy?
3. How much information would your character realistically know?
4. What alliances do you have, and would you be willing to backstab them later?
5. How do you feel about your current marriage?
6. How do you feel about the religious conformity of society?
7. Where are you in the social circle in terms of socioeconomic class, being a socialite, having gossip? Can you work your way up the societal ladder?
8. How can you use the resources around you to your advantage?

Committee Positions

Please keep in mind that most of the information in the other character descriptions are things your character doesn't know. Keep in mind what your character would realistically be aware of. The Dais will rule any motions or directives that point blame at characters without sufficient in-committee evidence as dilatory.

Giulia Tofana

The initial creator of Aqua Tofana and the leader of the primary gang. Daughter of herbalists who grew up learning to make elixirs and creams, she developed an apothecary business selling remedies, beauty treatments, and perhaps something a bit more sinister. Known to keep her cards close but liked by many women in the neighborhood, she is often seen talking to potential clients.

Girolama Spara

Step daughter of Guiana Tofana and inheritor to the gang. Following in her step-mother's footsteps, she is involved in the poison ring as a young woman, learning everything Guiana can teach her. Described as a "cunning woman" selling charms and cures to the nobility of Rome. Though Spara's chief motive was money, she sometimes did supply her poison free to poor women in desperate situations, out of pity or because she was angered by the abuse they suffered in their marriages.

Giovanna De Grandis

Poison maker in the initial circle of six women. A midwife and one of the commoners, DeGradis mostly dealt with poorer and less exalted clients. As a midwife she had connections with dozens of women in their most private moments and a reason to be involved with an apothecary. Born in the Eternal City, she could use her local contacts to bring in business for the group.

Maria Spinola

She is another poison maker in the original ring. She was born in Sicily, but she's been in Rome since 1627. She's known to be a thief. She makes her living from prostitution, where she learns many of the dark secrets of Rome. She has many connections in the cosmetics world and has been known to sell beauty products as well.

Graziosa Farina

A quirky eclectic old woman who periodically disappears on pilgrimage. She was born in the Eternal City and is connected to the church. She is a dispenser of Aqua Tofana, and presumably used her hometown contacts to bring in business. She dispenses the poison during Mass and washing streams.

Laura Crispolti

Laura is a high-society socialite, and the widow of Carrozzi, an extremely wealthy farm-owner. She isn't nobility, but she is an aristocrat and mingles within the socialite circles. She serves as the dispenser of Aqua Tofana into these wealthy circles.

Gabinus Frugi

Husband of Nessli Frugi and owner of Frugi's Beauty Treatments. Offering tonics, creams, and cleansers, Gabinus is a comfortable middle class man with an earnest living. He is slightly suspicious of a growing competition in beauty supplements for women, and while he trusts his wife and even lets her weigh in on business decisions, even she is not above suspicion when his life could be on the line.

Nessli Frugi

Wife of Gabinus Frugi, a kind hearted woman working in her husband's beauty storefront. While she is submissive to her husband, he isn't abusive and she is able to weigh in on business decisions and contributes greatly to the store, sometimes manning the counter. She enjoys a comfortable middle class lifestyle and a content marriage.

Gavia Flaccus

A poor woman and recent widow. Her late husband worked an unpleasant labor job in the mines, often coming home late and taking out his frustrations on Gavia. However, recently, Gavia came into

contact with some “herbalists” and it appears her husband became ill from his cold nights in the mines and has since passed. Gavia was spotted out of mourning colors earlier than expected, though has not been tremendously happy as she is still poor, but now without any breadwinner. She has turned to looking into resigning herself to a brothel to make a wage.

Evander Leos

He is a merchant, and has traveled around the surrounding countries frequently, establishing a well-connected international network. He is affluent, but nowhere near close to nobility-level of finances. He mostly deals with spices and salts. He is quietly convinced that he was almost poisoned, but he is torn between sweeping it under the rug and trusting in his wife, or convicting her, likely to death by hanging. His conflicting feelings on his marriage are made more complex by his children, who would be orphaned while he goes on his year-long voyages.

Mariana Leos

Wife of Evander Leos, currently the hot topic in the Papal state’s gossip. She is a homemaker, and her children require lots of attention as they’ve been known to get into places they shouldn’t be. Though she and her husband supposedly love each other, their marriage has been tumultuous and he is known to get violent when angry. She was intent on killing her husband, slipping a little poison into his soup each night, but got cold feet before administering a lethal dose. Did she realize she loved him after all? Was she afraid of persecution? Did she realize her children needed a father? She may be on thin ice depending on her husband’s response and if the poison ring decides she’s a liability.

Remus Fulgencio

The police chief of the Papal States. He has strong influence over any arrests that are made, and he works in tandem with the Church to hunt down potential criminals. He does not shy away from violence, and even though his job title is authoritative it is not generally the most lucrative, yet he always seems to have quite the disposable income for lavish parties.... He has a web of connections through spies within the entirety of the Papal States, but many of them are double-agents so he never knows who to trust.

Junia Fulgencio

The wife of Remus Fulgencio. She is a known presence in the city, but not many people know her interpersonally. It appears that the only people she is close to are Remus and a group of women she has weekly sewing lessons with. She is a homemaker, and is usually hard at work preparing for or cleaning up from Remus.

Rufus Marinelli

He is a policeman, but more importantly, he is an eligible bachelor (which means no poisoning from wives!). He's relatively affluent and holds some power in the Roman social hierarchy as part of the police force. He's part of the investigation into the recent poisonings spreading across Rome.

Father Girolamo

He is a priest, who appears to be devout to the church. However, he has been seen talking in the shadows with Graziosa. When questioned about this, he affirms that he was simply "offering her advice about her upcoming pilgrimages." He has access to knowledge within the church and a secure position as a preacher. However, it may be possible he has access to a certain dangerous substance and is an affiliate of the Aqua Tofana poison-makers.

Pope Alexander VII

The pope at the time, and the main power presiding over the unraveling of La Spara's poisoning ring. His belief in the religious order of the Papal States is unwavering, and he is determined to crush out these poisoners. It is sacrilege to kill one's husband, and he is willing to use all of the power and influence he has to quell this.

Pietro Pallavicini

One of Alexander's cardinals. Published a contemporary biography. Not only is Pallavicini a senior member of the city's government; he is also personally involved in the interrogations of the members of Spara's group, and as such was in the perfect position to set down a reliable summary of the gang's downfall. He has been married to his wife for eight years.

Maria Aldobrandini

A well connected young Duchess, second wife to the late Francesco Cesi. A member of one of Rome's most powerful and influential noble clans, she was married to the Duke at 13, for advancing her family's position in high society. Despite her ten year marriage she has fallen hopelessly in love with Francesco Santinelli, a lesser noble who had written her love poetry. Despite the unease of her husband's death, she has mostly escaped suspicion, but is locked up by her own family to avoid her rushing into a scandalous marriage with her lover.

Francesco Santinelli

He is of aristocratic status, but not a Duke. He is known throughout Rome as being one of the most attractive men in the city. He is the secret lover of Maria, and inadvertently caused her to poison her husband (although all he knows is that her husband mysteriously passed away). He is a little perturbed

by the rumors surrounding Maria, but most importantly, he wishes for Maria to be freed by her family so they can be wed.

Paulus Quirinus

An old drunk who is known to frequent the marketplace. He knows all of the alleyways of the Papal States, and he might just be the one person who knows the most gossip. A wild card, he chooses to create chaos wherever he goes. But maybe this will be the first political crisis where he finally aligns himself to a side....

Resources for Further Research

1. The best and most thorough account I can find:
<https://mikedashhistory.com/2015/04/06/aqua-tofana-slow-poisoning-and-husband-killing-in-17th-century-italy/>
2. <https://www.syfy.com/syfy-wire/giulia-tofana-the-italian-serial-poisoner-who-became-a-legend>
3. <https://aspectsofhistory.com/giulia-tofana-power-poison/>
4. <https://www.historiamag.com/giulia-tofana-poisoner-murderer-saviour/>



Conference Policies

Gratefully adapted from the NAIMUN LX delegate guide

1. Position Papers

Position Papers are required for all delegations who wish to receive an award. Position papers should be emailed to the chair by April 4, 8:00 p.m. ET. Please email the chair with any additional questions regarding position papers.

2. Plagiarism and Pre-writing

Plagiarism is strictly prohibited at CAMUN. Plagiarism includes, but is not limited to, verbatim or near-verbatim copying from digital or physical sources. This rule applies to any document submitted by delegates throughout the conference, including position papers, draft resolutions, directives, and other documents. Additionally, CAMUN prohibits the use of artificially intelligent generators like ChatGPT in the creation of written documents. All work will be thoroughly checked for plagiarism.

3. Technology

CAMUN prohibits the use of technology in committee sessions, including but not limited to computer and cell phones, except during unmoderated caucuses as directed by the Chair.

4. Accommodations

For questions and requests related to disability and special accommodations, please email the CAMUN secretariat at ModelUN@ConcordAcademy.org. CAMUN will do its best to fulfill all appropriate requests.